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Alaska National Guardsmen rescue two plane crash victims near Talkeetna

CAMP DENALI, Alaska—Airmen with the Alaska Air National Guard's 210th, 211th and 212th Rescue Squadrons rescued two people involved in a plane crash in the vicinity of Iron Creek, east of Talkeetna, Alaska, July 1.

The 11th Air Force Rescue Coordination Center received an initial report at 1:32 p.m. from an F-22 Raptor that heard a mayday call but was unable to get a response on the radio while returning from a training mission at Eielson Air Force Base.

"At that point, we began a thorough investigation," said Senior Master Sgt. Robert Carte, the superintendent of the 11th Air Force RCC. "All military aircraft were accounted for, no civilian planes were overdue and no beacons had been reported. It was worth investigating, but we couldn't correlate any other signs of distress in the state of Alaska."

At 2:47 p.m., the FAA's Anchorage Center reported that it had picked up a mayday call on the emergency frequency and reported it to the 11th Air Force RCC.

"He reported that he was near Iron Creek and that he was in distress," Carte said. "We immediately contacted the 176th Wing, and they accepted the search mission."

At 3:44 p.m., a HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter from the 210th Rescue Squadron with two Guardian Angels from the 212th Rescue Squadron took off from Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson.

At the same time, an active-duty C-130 Hercules from the 537th Airlift Squadron, JBER, picked up the signal from a 121.5 emergency locator transmitter near Talkeetna. The crew of the C-130 reported the instance back to the 11th Air Force RCC.

"The active duty crew did an excellent job providing weather reports and more detailed coordinates while searching for the beacon," Carte said. "The C-130 remained on scene as long as its fuel would allow then passed off the incident to the HH-60 once it was in the area. This was a total force effort by JBER aircrews."

"The helicopter initially searched but was unable to locate aircraft," Carte said. "Weather precluded searching at higher altitudes, and radio communication in the area was degraded throughout the mission."

At 5:40 p.m., a HC-130 King from the 211th Rescue Squadron with two Guardian Angels from the 212th Rescue Squadron was rerouted to support the mission after returning to JBER from a training mission earlier in the day.

"They were sent to provide fuel and communications relay for the helicopter," Carte explained.

Despite the degraded communication from the area, the HH-60 was able to get a message back to the 11th Air Force RCC that they had made contact with two uninjured survivors at 6 p.m.

"The well-prepared survivors indicated they had spent the night in the aircraft after the crash," Carte said. "The pilot indicated he was intermittently switching on his 121.5 ELT, which is not something we recommend. It's important that pilots leave the ELT on so rescuers have a better chance at locating them. In the case of a 121.5 ELT, it can cause a significant delay when rescue aircraft don't have a constant signal to focus on."

"Had the aircraft been equipped with a 406 MHz ELT beacon, his emergency contact information would have been transmitted via satellite to the RCC, which would have expedited his recovery significantly," Carte added.

The newer 406 ELT beacons transmit information to satellites that are monitored by the U.S. Mission Control Center, operated by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, in Suitland, Md. This information is then sent out to rescue centers responsible for the area of the incident.

"The search-and-rescue community is very happy that pilots are preparing themselves well for crashes, but not all of these cases turn out this way," Carte said. "There is no substitute for a properly installed, properly registered 406 MHz ELT. Upon manual or automatic activation, it gets 100 percent of the attention of RCC personnel and tells us of your location within minutes. Sometimes those precious minutes can mean the difference between life and death."

At 6:20 p.m., the two survivors, reported to be uninjured, were dropped off by the HH-60 in Talkeetna, where they were released to Alaska State Troopers.

The 210th, 211th and 212th Rescue Squadrons were credited with two saves for this mission.

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